



ADVANCED WINDOWS

Internet Explorer 7



Will the new version of Internet Explorer enhance our browsing pleasure? Karl Wright puts Microsoft's new browser through its paces and asks if it is a step forward – or treading the same old ground

On 27th July 2005, Microsoft gave a select group of developers access to advanced beta versions of its new operating system, Windows Vista, and the Internet Explorer 7 web browser. *Computer Shopper* has managed to get its hands on copies of both.

We'll preview Vista next month, when we've had more time to test it. This month, we take a look at the advanced beta release of Internet Explorer 7. In this sneak preview, we consider the benefits of Microsoft's new browser, which will be released at the end of the year. It is likely to be the final version to run under Windows XP.

SECRET SEVEN

The first thing we noticed running Internet Explorer 7 (IE7) is that it is less cluttered than version 6. The



Internet Explorer 7's new look reduces the amount of space taken up by the browser's buttons and menus

address bar is now the first thing inside the frame, at the very top of the page. Under the address bar are tabs that show which websites you have loaded. You can click on a tab quickly and easily to change which website is being displayed. We cover tabs in more detail in the box below. The menus and buttons have been moved to the same line and the buttons are smaller. The refresh button has been moved to sit to the right of the address bar.

The result of this redesign is that buttons and menus take up less space than in older versions of Internet Explorer. This leaves you with more space for the web page you're browsing.

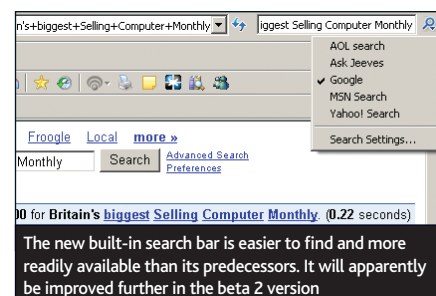
NEW SEEKERS

To the right of the address bar is a new, built-in search bar. This allows you to search the web directly from within the browser's main interface without having to install third-party toolbars or open a side bar.

Contrary to rumours, Internet Explorer 7 (IE7) doesn't disable third-party toolbars when you install it. If you install IE7 on a system with no search engine preferences set, the toolbar will default to using MSN Search. If you already have a toolbar installed, or you've used a Registry hack to specify a preferred search engine for Internet Explorer 6 (IE6), version 7 respects your settings and carries them over to the new browser.

We installed it over the top of IE6 with Google's toolbar. The Google toolbar carried on working and Google was set as the default search engine for the IE7 search bar. We uninstalled the Google Toolbar and installed the Yahoo! toolbar. The results were as expected – almost. The Yahoo! toolbar worked fine, but for some reason the Internet Explorer toolbar had switched from using AskJeeves as its default engine to using MSN Search. It only took a second to fix this, but it's a strange bug.

Even when you've chosen a default engine for the IE7 search bar, you're not stuck with it. By default, beta 1 gives you five search engines to choose from, including MSN, Google, AskJeeves, Yahoo! and AOL. According to the Internet Explorer Development Team, beta 2 will include more



The new built-in search bar is easier to find and more readily available than its predecessors. It will apparently be improved further in the beta 2 version

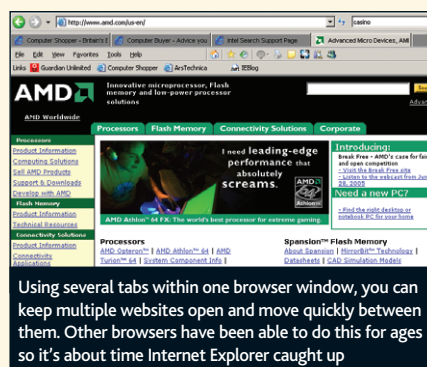
TABBED BROWSING

The most noticeable change to IE, tabbed browsing makes it easy to switch between sites

For most users, the biggest change in Internet Explorer is probably the introduction of tabbed browsing. Rather than having to open each additional site in a new browser window, you open a new tab in the same window. This makes switching between sites quicker and easier.

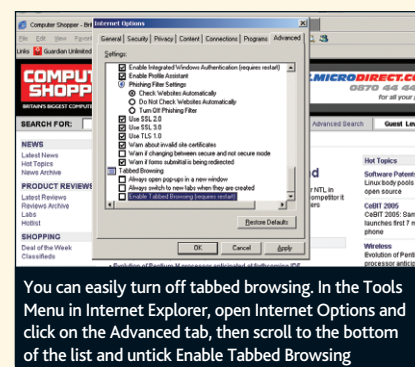
The tabbed browsing in Internet Explorer 7 beta 1 works fine, and just as you would expect if you are familiar with the Firefox web browser. You even use the same Ctrl-T or Ctrl and left-click key and mouse combinations to open a new tab. Alternatively, you can click the grey rectangle that appears after the final tab and your browser will open a new tab.

According to Tony Schreiner of the Internet Explorer development team, there's currently no No target="_tab" command for



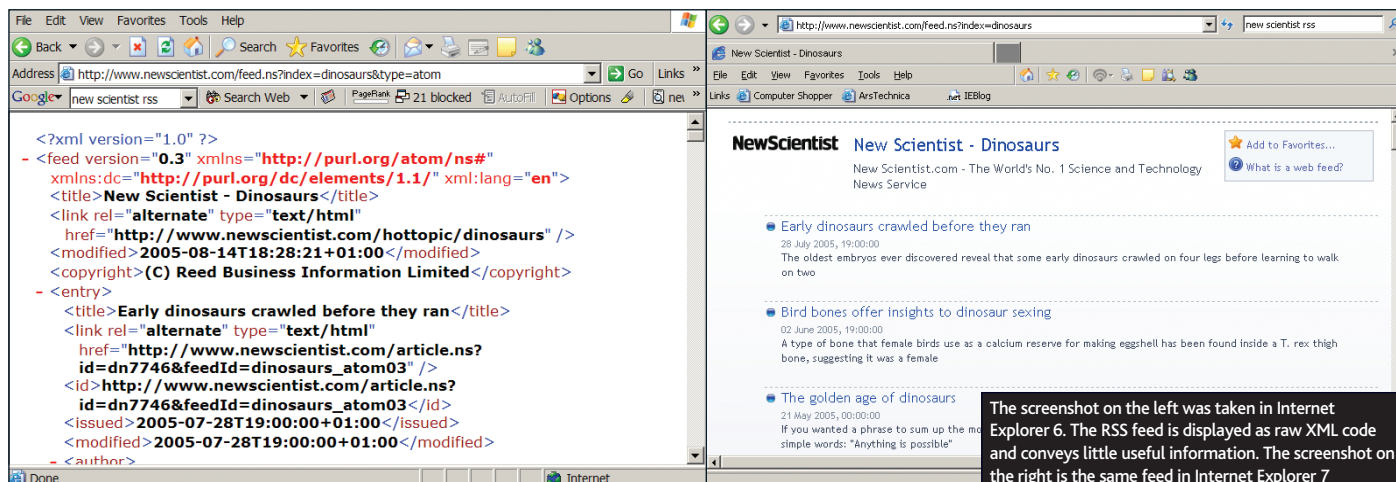
Using several tabs within one browser window, you can keep multiple websites open and move quickly between them. Other browsers have been able to do this for ages so it's about time Internet Explorer caught up

scripts, so any scripted pop-up windows open in their own frame. This is something Microsoft intends to fix in the next release, beta 2.



You can easily turn off tabbed browsing. In the Tools Menu in Internet Explorer, open Internet Options and click on the Advanced tab, then scroll to the bottom of the list and untick Enable Tabbed Browsing

If you don't want to use tabbed browsing, you can easily turn it off using the Advanced tab of Internet Options.



built-in search engine options and a way for the user to add search engines to the toolbar's list.

There is a search bar built into IE6, but each time you want to use it you have to open it from the View menu. This is more fiddly and time consuming than having a search bar available all the time as part of the browser's main screen. It's also much harder to customise the search engine used by IE6's built-in search bar. If you want Google as your default engine, for instance, you have to change several Registry values. The toolbar in beta 1 is already a big improvement and if it becomes even more customisable in beta 2 or the final release, it's difficult to see why anyone would need a third-party toolbar with IE7.

SHRINK WRAPPED

Streamlined printing is another new addition to IE7. If you print a web page using IE6, you'll find the margins of the page are cropped. IE7 solves this with its Shrink-to-Fit setting. This adjusts the page to fit within the margins of your specified paper size, with the minimum distortion or disruption to the design.

The new print function also has a built-in orphan control. This looks at the last page of the document you're printing to see how much of

that page is being printed. If it sees that a very small amount of the page will be used – perhaps the last page only contains two lines of copyright information – then it automatically resizes your document so those two lines are placed on the preceding page. Users of Firefox will recognise this feature and it looks and behaves similarly in both browsers.

FEEDER FRENZY

A really simple syndication (RSS) feed is a way to get news headlines from a website. They are viewed in an RSS reader. Because the headlines are continually updated, RSS feeders push new content to users without those users having to do anything. This is useful if you want to stay up-to-date with the minimum of effort. Each headline functions as a link to the web page containing the full story, which can usually be opened in a separate pane of the RSS reader or in your main browser.

Before version 7, Internet Explorer didn't interact with RSS feeds in any way. It had no way of knowing, or telling you, if a site offered an RSS feed. If you found a feed and tried to open it in Internet Explorer, all you'd see was an unformatted page of XML code – the screenshot on the left above shows you what this looks like.

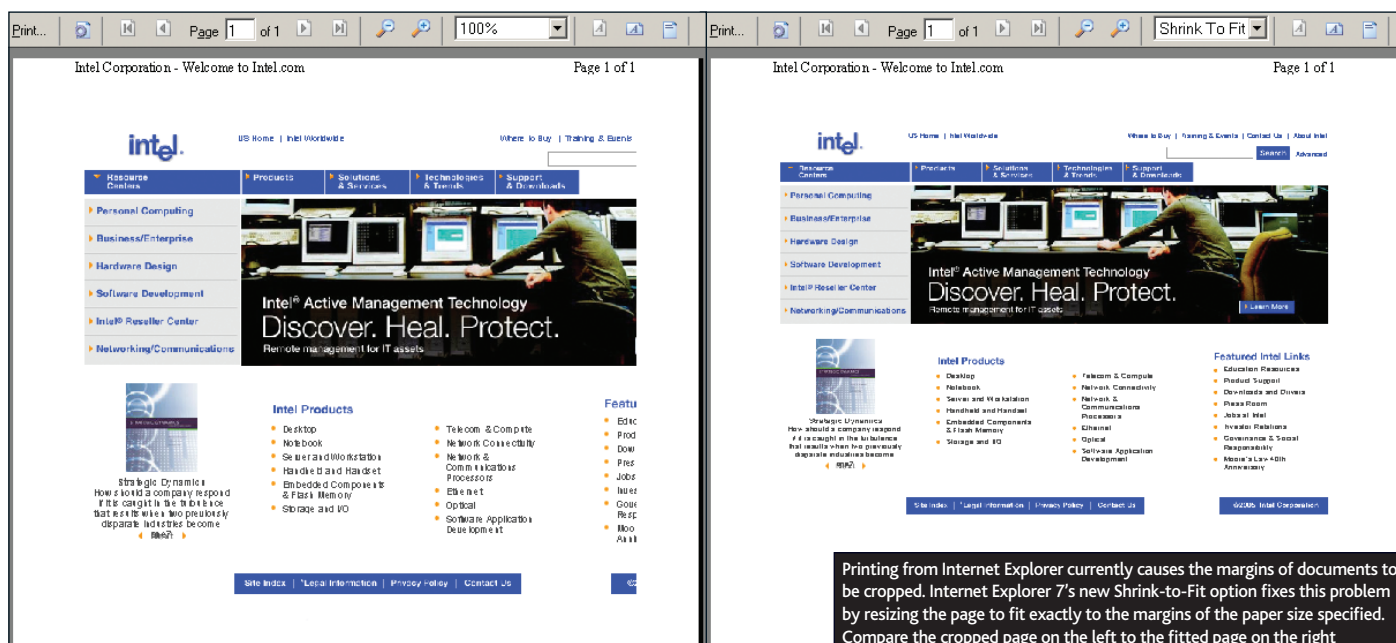
IE7 includes an RSS button on the toolbar. If you open a website that offers an RSS feed, such as <http://news.bbc.co.uk> for example, the web feed button becomes active, changing from grey to red. Clicking on the button opens the RSS feed in Internet Explorer. The feed is then rendered in a human-readable format rather than as a page of XML code. Once you've checked the RSS feed, you can decide whether or not to subscribe to it.

According to Microsoft, IE7 won't replace a dedicated RSS feed reader, but it does work better with your RSS feed reader, making it easier to manage and work with RSS.

The beta 1 release of IE7 doesn't support Atom feeds, either Atom 0.3 or Atom 1.0, and displays them as unformatted code. But according to the Internet Explorer development team, there will be support in future releases of the browser.

STYLE CHALLENGE

Cascading style sheets (CSSs) are documents used by web developers to specify how their sites should look. For instance, a developer might specify that every time a table is used it should have specific characteristics, such as a thick green border but no spaces between the table's cells. Rather than adding the exact formatting information to the code of





every table, the developer simply does it once in the CSS document. The web browser checks the CSS file and applies the appropriate formatting to every table it finds. This saves time and makes websites easier to keep looking consistent.

IE6 experienced some problems working with standard CSS files. Rendering CSS tables was erratic, and placing a table in a document could cause other elements to shift around the page and overlap each other. Other problems included difficulties in getting rollover graphics to display and disappearing margins.

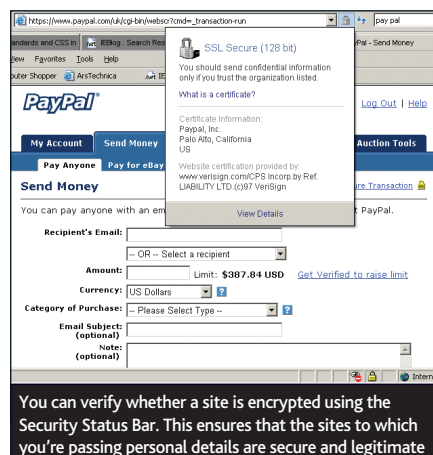
When IE7 was first announced, there was some speculation as to whether it would conform to the CSS 2.0 standard. We tried Internet Explorer 7 beta 1 with several CSS 2.0 features. The @media print command worked fine and we managed to print out a test site with no sidebar. The list-numbering command also worked, but specifying regional quotation marks did not.

These are just a few randomly selected tests. The technical overview released with beta 1 says: "Internet Explorer 7 is prioritising compliance to CSS standards by first implementing the features that developers have said are most important to them." On the official IE Blog Chris Wilson, head program manager for the Internet Explorer development team, went further: "I want to be clear that our intent is to build a platform that fully complies with the appropriate web standards, in particular CSS 2 (2.1, once it's been recommended)." It will be interesting to see the extent to which these words are put into practice in beta 2 and the final release of Internet Explorer 7.

SAFE KEEPING

Sites that provide the ability to transfer money or send your personal details should use secure socket layer (SSL) encryption. Such sites advertise a certificate that proves it is run by a genuine organisation and not a hoaxer. IE7 gives you one-click access to this certificate through the padlock icon, which has moved from the bottom right of the browser frame to a more prominent position on the top right.

In addition to the Phishing Filter (see the box above), IE7 has several new security and privacy features. Simplest of all is the Delete Browsing History setting. This gets rid of cookies, temporary internet files and your browser's history in one click. All these traces could be deleted in IE6, but only after navigating through several screens of options. Furthermore, IE6 couldn't delete the contents of the



You can verify whether a site is encrypted using the Security Status Bar. This ensures that the sites to which you're passing personal details are secure and legitimate.

PHISHING FILTER

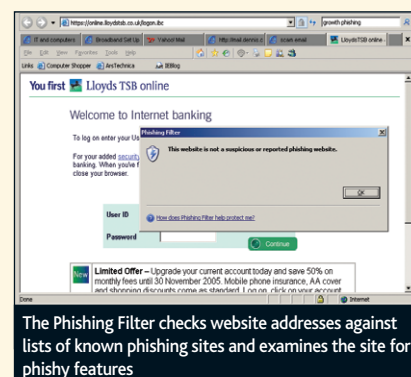
The new version of Internet Explorer keeps you safer than ever

Probably the most significant new addition to IE7 is the Phishing Filter. A phishing website is a site designed to look like that of a bank or online retailer. Fraudsters try to trick people into entering credit card and bank details into these sites by sending them emails that contain links to the fake web pages and a message asking for verification of financial details.

The Phishing Filter works in two ways. When you enter a website address into the browser, or click on a link, the filter checks this link against a list of known phishing sites – a list that Microsoft updates hourly. The list has to be updated frequently because the average life span of a phishing site is only about two days. The filter also analyses the site you're about to open for any phishy characteristics. Microsoft isn't saying which characteristics would cause the filter to single a site out as being a possible threat.

Some people are bound to have reservations about Internet Explorer

communicating with Microsoft about every URL they look up, and then sending some of those URLs to Microsoft. These people can simply switch the filter off or, better yet, not turn it on in the first place. You have to opt in to using the filter, which asks if you want to run it in the background of the application the first time you use IE7.



The Phishing Filter checks website addresses against lists of known phishing sites and examines the site for phishy features

index.dat files. These files contain a record of every website a user visits and until now could be deleted only by third-party software. In our test, the Delete Browsing History button appeared to remove browsing records from the index.dat files.

There have been some changes in the way that Internet Explorer handles web addresses (URLs). According to the technical overview, released at the same time as IE7, the new browser requires every window to display its URL. This is designed to make it harder for spyware and virus distributors to trick users into clicking on windows that look like system dialog boxes or messages from legitimate sites.

In our tests, however, we saw plenty of pop-up windows with no address bars. Possibly these were scripted windows that opened in a separate frame. Even so, it seems strange to have a set of windows that are at odds with the rationale behind other security enhancements.

It is planned that the beta 2 version of IE7 will introduce Protected Mode. If you run Internet Explorer in Protected Mode, the browser only has

the rights of a limited user. This means programs executed through the browser will not be able to change Registry settings or access system folders. This should prevent maliciously scripted websites installing most spyware and viruses. If it works as intended, Protected Mode will be particularly useful for home users, who often have only a single account with administrator rights that they use for everything.

IE7 also offers users a No Add-Ons mode. This mode, accessed through Start, Programs, Accessories, System Tools, is available in beta 1. The mode launches Internet Explorer without any plug-ins running. You can use this if you think one of the plug-ins you've installed is malware and you want to search the web for a fix without activating the plug-in, which might block your search. Microsoft has said that beta 2 will have an improved add-on manager, allowing you to better control the behaviour of the plug-ins you install.

THE WAITING GAME

Even in its beta form, Internet Explorer 7 is a big improvement over version 6. Tabbed browsing is a relatively simple concept but makes a big difference to the way you use the browser. It's much easier to work with one window that contains multiple tabs, rather than several separate windows that clutter up your Taskbar. However, it's difficult to get excited about a feature that Firefox has offered for a long time. The same is true of the streamlined printing feature. It's great, but it looks almost exactly the same as the function in Firefox.

The Phishing Filter, on the other hand, is a genuinely exciting feature, as is the improved RSS feed handling. It will be interesting to see what changes are introduced in the beta 2 release of the browser, and it looks as if we shouldn't have to wait too long for it. The final release is due before the end of the year, so the next beta shouldn't be that far away. **CS**

